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WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Chilean Catholic Church Stressing Human Rights

The Catholic Church in Chile appears to be taking a stronger stand on human-rights issues. Recent statements by church leaders suggest they are suspicious of the military government's complicity in the possible death and disappearance of Chilean extremists, accounts of which have received wide coverage in the South American press.

The bishop of Santiago celebrated a mass last week for the families of 119 persons, mostly members of the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, who allegedly have been killed or wounded by government forces or been reported missing abroad under mysterious circumstances. The mass drew an overflow crowd, and the bishop's words about the need for Chileans to overcome "fear and insecurity" left no doubt among his listeners that he was denouncing the junta's handling of the matter.

Chile's press says that a number of the Chilean extremists were killed in gun battles with Argentine police and that others were killed in a purge by the Movement of the Revolutionary Left. The Interdenominational Committee for Peace in Santiago believes that these stories were originally circulated by Chilean security forces to account for the disappearances.

The committee's thesis is that the 119 were detained by the military government, died in custody, and were disposed of in Chile. Right-wing Argentines linked to the Argentine government may have collaborated with Chilean intelligence forces to plant reports on the alleged clashes in Argentina.

President Pinochet pledged in a meeting with Cardinal Silva several weeks ago that the government would look into the disappearances, but [redacted] do not believe the Cardinal's entreaty made much of an impact on Pinochet. Shortly after the meeting, Cardinal Silva gave the first hint that the church was losing patience with the government; he then appealed for a crusade for mutual respect and tolerance.

In a recent press statement, the Cardinal said he had no objection to publication of the peace committee's findings on the missing extremists, thereby implicitly encouraging its probe.

[redacted] Cardinal Silva also authorized—or at least was aware of—the mass offered last week for the families of the missing persons. The Chilean church's views have been echoed by the papal nuncio, who expressed shock, and the "disquiet of ambassadors accredited in Santiago" over the fate of the missing Chileans.

While the church is not likely to trade charges openly with the government, its spokesmen will probably focus attention on two principal areas:

- The failure of officials to explain satisfactorily the disappearances of persons presumably detained by security forces.
- Continued indications that the regime is not abiding by new national security laws that place restrictions on illegal detention and torture. [redacted]

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